RETHINKING THE INTERCULTURAL PARADIGM IN TROUBLED TIMES

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The following essay is a transcript of the first keynote lecture delivered at the international symposium on 'Changing World, Challenging Boundaries.' I have chosen to retain the conversational flow of the address, adding footnotes, wherever necessary, to guide the reader to publications which elaborate in a more academic register on specific points raised in the lecture. Structured like a personal journey, the present text attempts to capture some of the contingency, risk, disillusionment, and breakthroughs of my journey, which inflect the larger discourse of the field.

To speak of "troubled times" in our world today could be a euphemism. To reflect on theatre in troubled times is more of a challenge. It could be argued that we are living today with so much uncertainty and unpredictability that theatre is having a hard time trying to grasp and represent the volatile immediacies of our times. It could also be said that the most charismatic and flamboyant performers of our times are not actors on the stage, but politicians in the public sphere – it is they who are commanding our attention with their rhetoric, metamorphoses, and split-second timing. We have become mere spectators of their command performances on the media. And yet, I will attempt to argue in this lecture that theatre continues to play a critical role, perhaps more than ever before, in addressing our troubled times.

I will structure my argument by focusing on one particular concept to which I have been closely affiliated, both theoretically and practically, since the late 1970s. It has proved to be extraordinarily tenacious and pertinent, even as its limitations and seeming redundancy have been duly pointed out in recent years. I am referring to *interculturalism*, the exchange of cultures across national borders, which was first theorized in theatre and performance studies in the United States in the 1970s.[1] In my earliest interventions on interculturalism, while I was still a student studying dramaturgy at the Yale School of Drama, I was troubled by the Eurocentric arrogance of much First World intercultural theory and practice. I was troubled by its decontextualization of non-Western cultures. And I was troubled by the superficial ways in which performance texts, conventions, and techniques from these cultures were rendered in exotic spectacles that were primarily consumed by audiences in the West.[2] Sadly, as I look back on this period, I am compelled to point out that I was something of a lone voice in the

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[1] A useful overview of intercultural performance from the 1970s onwards can be read in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, edited by Patrice Pavis. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. Some of the key writings by Richard Schechner can be read in "Intercultural Performance," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (T94), 1982; *The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1982; "Interculturalism and the Culture of Choice," *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, op. cit. Other critical texts include Eugenio Barba's *Beyond the Floating Islands*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986. For a more recent publication that attempts to move beyond the intercultural paradigm, read *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, et.al. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. There are other publications that continue to affirm the intercultural paradigm, notably *Interculturalism and Performance Now: New Directions?* Edited by Charlotte McIvor and Jason King. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

[2] For a detailed background on my critique of interculturalism in the Euro-American theatre of the 1970s, read my books *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993, and the introduction and first chapter of *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

critique of Eurocentrism in intercultural theatre practice which often got me marked as a "Third World dissenting voice." Hard as it may be to imagine today, the field of Theatre and Performance Studies had yet to engage with postcolonial theory in the late 1970s with any rigor. In this regard, I remember only too vividly being influenced by Edward Said's seminal text on *Orientalism*, which I had read in the year of its publication in 1978, which had a phenomenal impact on the politicization of the humanities.[3] While other departments on the Yale campus were buzzing with debates and polemics around Said's seminal intervention, the School of Drama remained more or less oblivious to its impact. Neither was there any critical engagement with Saidian cultural politics and its imbrication in postcolonial studies within the larger fraternity of theatre scholars.

The time-lag in "the postcolonial turn" of Theatre and Performance Studies may have catalyzed my critique of the essentially celebratory understanding of Euro-American interculturalism. But critique, I would argue, is never just fault-finding; rather, as Gayatri Spivak has reminded us, "we can only subject to 'critique' that which we need in order to live."[4] I could not put it more forcefully. For me, interculturalism has never been a mere academic subject; it is more like a life-principle which enables me to live and resist the resurgent nationalisms and sectarian tensions of our times. Far from being esoteric or elitist, it is a necessary concept and practice. At the same time, I would not regard it as utopian, preferring to call attention to its contradictions and ever renewing problems, which I will attempt to point out in this lecture with a few examples. As the saying goes, "the more things change, the more they remain the same." If we are living in troubled times, there is no reason to believe that there was ever any kind of Golden Age in dealing with intercultural exchange.

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Let me begin, therefore, with a particularly problematic production from 1975, Peter Brook's much celebrated intercultural hit *The Ik*, an adaptation of a controversial anthropological study by Colin Turnbull called *The Mountain People* (1972).[5] This book provided a highly judgmental and troubled perspective on the Ik, a marginalized tribal community living in north-east Uganda, who by the 1970s had been severely displaced and had resorted to the worst forms of internal violence and brutality. According to Turnbull, the only way in which the Ik could survive is if they could be forcibly separated in groups of less than ten, thereby compelling them to accept coercive forms of assimilation into "civilized" culture. Needless to say, this "solution" is brutal in its own right and Turnbull was justifiably taken to task by his own peers in the field of anthropology, and later, by the Ik themselves who would have liked to sue him for his highly inaccurate and racist representation of their lives. Instead of problematizing the discipline of anthropology in relation to its larger colonial affiliations, and without any reflexive critique of Turnbull's complex subjectivity, Brook and his intercultural collaborators presented a highly simplistic and reductive rendering of the Ik's predicament as a parable of what can go wrong with humanity.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the production's dramaturgy concerned the decision to allow the anthropologist character in the play to speak in French or English, depending on

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[3] Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

[4] Cited by Judith Butler in "The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood," *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Wendy Brown, et. al. Berkeley: University of California, 2009.

[5] Colin M. Turnbull, *The Mountain People*. First edition published by New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972.

where the production was staged. In contrast, the Ik represented by diverse international actors, babbled in a non-verbal idiom. They were denied any language. In this denial, one could argue that they were denied a culture, a history, a sensibility, a mind to reflect on their problems, and above all, the capacity to critique and talk back to the anthropologist. In the virtuosity of the actors' babble, which was considered "experimental" at that time, one confronted a kind of intercultural chic, a version of the contemporary exotic.

I first read about this production in an interview given by Kenneth Tynan where he pointed out that in the programme note to the production, it said, "As far as anyone knows, the Ik still exist."[6] I must acknowledge that I was shocked when I read this statement as a student. I couldn't believe that any theatre company could presume to represent a community starving to death in another part of the world without preliminary research and field-work, not least permission to use the lives of the community for a commercial production. This indifference to the actual reality of the Ik compelled me to make my first intervention in the field of interculturalism, in relation to the *ethics* of political representation. With the aesthetics of intercultural production, one has no other option but to engage with its ethics as well.

I faced two primary problems with the underlying assumptions of interculturalism in the 1970s, which I am in a better position to understand today. One, interculturalism was glibly contrasted with internationalism, but with no engagement with the enormous discourse around internationalism in political theory and philosophy. Instead, it was assumed that internationalism represented official exchanges of cultures across national borders, as represented by government agencies and diplomatic missions. In contrast, it was assumed that interculturalism was voluntarist, autonomous, and mediated by individuals and social groups, who were driven not by ideology but by the pursuit of a "culture of choice."[7] To this day, I cannot understand how one can presume to "choose" another culture, as one would a commodity or a life-style. Also, the assumption that the culture being chosen would want to be involved in any kind of exchange also needs to be kept in mind. A mutual reciprocity of desire could be a wish-fulfilment on the part of ardent and self-absorbed interculturalists.

From the politics of my location in India, it was only too clear to me that I could not presume to share the privilege of voluntary border-crossing assumed by my First World peers, whose passports enabled them to travel freely. This is not a privilege that any of us owning Indian and Sri Lankan passports can readily assume. Unquestionably, in the aftermath of the "war on terror," the situation has become only worse. In my early days of intercultural research, I used to think, not without some irony, that the first act in the Theatre of Interculturalism begins with our confrontation with the visa officer on home ground. If he or she is satisfied with our "performance," we can then confront the immigration officer in the second act, who would need to be convinced that we are not potential illegal immigrants or terrorists. Only then does it become possible to cross the border to pursue intercultural work.

Today it is clear to me that while interculturalism is opposed to all forms of nationalism, including visa surveillance, it can scarcely afford to ignore international collaboration which takes place in so many diverse ways, particularly in the visual arts world. Through a combination of private, public, and state funding, the earlier distinction between "official" and "non-official" forms of exchange has become increasingly blurred. A more complex question

[6] Kenneth Tynan, "Director as Misanthropist: On the Moral Neutrality of Peter Brook," *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 8, No. 25, 1977.

[7] Richard Schechner, "Interculturalism and the Culture of Choice," *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. In this essay, Schechner also formulates the unproductive binary between the "international" and the "intercultural," the "official" and "non-official" exchanges of culture.

for the practice of interculturalism concerns the creation of a new epistemology of the "national" in opposition to "nationalism."[8] To what extent can a national anti-nationalism contribute towards intercultural practice? I will return to this question later in the lecture.

My second problem with interculturalism from the 1970s had to do with its seemingly apolitical ambience, a kind of postnationalism beyond borders, which inevitably concealed a politics of its own. Today I would characterize this politics as determined by the capitalist-driven values of liberal individualism. Even while acknowledging that interculturalism does draw broadly on liberal principles relating to democracy, freedom, curiosity, the right to dissent, it becomes increasingly clear to me that liberalism is not free of its own forms of violence, condescension, self-privilege, self-ownership, and social exclusion, as Talal Asad has argued so forcibly.[9] The problem is that liberals invariably assume that they are so well-meaning and reasonable, so ready to "agree to disagree," that the problem inevitably lies with their opponents. In my thinking today, I would urge more critical reflexivity in engaging with the liberal premises of interculturalism and a greater openness to non-liberal cultural formations and constituencies. I will deal with these possibilities later in the lecture.

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By the mid-1980s I returned to India with an intercultural theatre project, the *Request Concert Project*, in collaboration with the German designer and director Manuel Lutgenhorst, who had designed a celebrated production of *Request Concert* in New York. *Request Concert* is a one-woman, wordless play by the German playwright, Franz Xaver Kroetz, in which a working woman comes home from work and goes through her household routine culminating in suicide. For Kroetz, the suicide was meant to be a protest against the mechanization and anonymity of the woman's life. In contrast, we know that suicide in our part of the world is linked to harsher realities like poverty, caste, community, family, and the patriarchal pressures of marriage. At a dramaturgical level, the questioning of suicide in the *Request Concert Project* was one among several factors determining the adaptation of Kroetz's play within the socio-political, economic, and performative contexts of six Asian cities – Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Jakarta, Seoul and Tokyo.

Without going into the details of the project, which can be read in my book *Theatre and the World*,[10] I would prefer to focus in this lecture on one significant conceptual shift. While working on three adaptations of the play in Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai, in three different locations, in three different regions of India (Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu), with significantly different cultures of everyday life, with three distinct performers coming from different performance cultures, it became clear to me that it was not the so-called intercultural dynamics of the project that were of burning concern: in other words, how a "German" text gets adapted in an "Indian" context. Of greater concern was the need to figure out the differences *within* "the Indian context" through diverse regional, local, and communitarian particularities and relationships.

[8] This point has been articulated in my intervention "Reclaiming the National – Against Nationalism," *Bauhaus Imaginista Journal*, http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/5054/reclaiming-the-national, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2019.

[9] Asad's critique of liberalism has been sustained across several publications including *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, and *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

[10] The second part of the book *Theatre and the World*, op. cit., deals with three adaptations of *Request Concert* in Kolkata, Mumbai, and Chennai.

Through an active engagement with these particularities, I arrived at the concept of the "intracultural," which can be regarded as a negotiation of internal cultural differences embedded within regional, local, and communitarian contexts, which exist almost independently of the larger framing of the nation-state. These differences are so minuscule, if not invisible, that they hardly register as "differences" at all, subsumed as they are in the imagined homogeneities of a shared existence. Moving beyond theatre practice, it became clear to me in my writings on communal and ethnic violence that it is these differences that conceal the most explosive potentialities.

Like many other researchers of sectarian violence, I have been challenged by the most basic questions: What is it that provokes ordinary people who have lived with seeming harmony over a period of time, sharing the same minimal resources – a water pump, a toilet, festivals, everyday trials and tribulations, a flood, an outbreak of malaria - to become killers overnight? What makes neighbours become killers? To attempt to answer this question, I would reject any theory legitimizing an innate, primordial instinct of violence embedded in all human beings; instead, I would call attention to those little differences underlying the seeming harmony of communities, deeply internalized and divested of any sustained interrogation or negotiation. It is these little differences, like flickers of a submerged fire, which have the potentiality to ignite through all kinds of provocations, resulting in bloodshed and devastation.

Beware of the little differences that would not appear to be conflictual at all: This has been the central insight that I have gained from my intracultural theatre research, which has compelled me to recognize that the most virulent differences are those which do not appear to be different at all. In my own experience at the Ninasam Theatre Institute in the village of Heggodu in Karnataka, I have attempted to confront the elusive intracultural differences of actors in rural areas, who may appear to share almost everything in common – language, food, dress, religion, first-generation education – but whose infinitesimal caste differences serve to hierarchize and divide individuals at implicit levels. It is through an engagement with the vulnerability of caste differences, so carefully camouflaged and suppressed, that one can begin to mobilize theatre at an intracultural level.[11]

In a more complex register beyond the specificities of theatre practice, I have confronted real differences in my interactions with the Siddi community. The Siddi are persons of African origin who have migrated to the Indian subcontinent over centuries as soldiers, sailors, merchants, traders, missionaries, and slaves.[12] Today, there are less than 50,000 Siddi in India constituting an internal diaspora of scattered communities located in settlements in the states of Gujarat, Goa, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh. While one may be driven by secular idealism as a theatre worker in conceptualizing something like a pan-Indian Siddi solidarity, the attempt to bring the Siddi together within one discursive and ideological framework is fraught with risks. The reality is that their differences marked by language, religion, economic mobilization, and political affiliation are so acute, that the only elements that would seem to bring them together are the color of their skin, by which they are stigmatized, and a memory of Africa that is so nebulous that it is almost non-existent.[13] Engaging with the inner differences of the Siddi

[11] A strong example of the caste differences underlying secular identity can be found in the concluding section of "Phantoms of the Other: Fragments of the Communal Unconscious," *The Politics of Cultural Practice*, op. cit., pp. 120-122.

[12] For an overview on the history of the Siddi, read *Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians*, eds. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward A. Alpers. Noida, India: Rainbow Publishers, 2004.

[13] For an analysis of my interaction with the Siddi on a workshop dealing with "Land and Memory" at the Ninasam Theatre Institute, and the difficulties faced in organizing a global conference and national workshop on the Siddi in Goa, see my essay "Dimensions of Conflict in Globalization and Cultural Practice: A Critical

across regions, I struggled to engage with the oblivion of their diasporic memory within the identity politics of the postcolonial Indian nation-state. Eventually I came to realize that an intracultural engagement with the Siddis demanded the closest possible interaction with the minutiae of their own locations and contexts. Only then does it become possible to imagine their possibilities of social transformation and interaction at inter-regional levels and within the larger global dimensions of the African-Asian diaspora.

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Let us now widen the perspective of this lecture by moving from the intracultural to the global. By the early 1990s, there was a significant shift, eastwards, in the cultural and economic capital available for intercultural experimentation through workshops, symposiums, and productions. This shift could be described as an "inter-Asian" cultural initiative which brought together artists across Asia, with funding provided by richer Asian nations like Japan and Singapore. Earlier, if one wanted to participate in intercultural work, one had to be invited to Europe and the United States, where one was inevitably framed by a Eurocentric framework of references. With the advent of inter-Asian theatrical experimentation, I was hopeful that it would be possible to change the existing paradigm, not least because the sponsors of these experiments in Asia were keenly aware of the critique of Eurocentric interculturalism as exemplified by highly publicized productions directed by luminaries like Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine.[14] I was hopeful that the same mistakes would not be repeated. I was wrong.

Working in Singapore on the Flying Circus Project, directed by Ong Keng Sen, it became very clear to me that Asiacentricity could be the other side of the same coin as Eurocentricity. And, in many ways, it could be more insidious. With Eurocentricity, which is inextricably linked to the discourse of nineteenth-century Enlightenment and the legacies of colonialism and imperialism, there can be few illusions. Asiacentricity, I realized, is more of a dark horse not least because it assumes that "we Asians" are linked through family resemblances, which may not, in reality, exist. For the first time, I was made to confront that "Asia" is not just a geographical expanse or continent, but an idea, a discourse, and more precisely, a brand. In Singapore of the 1990s, for instance, "Asia" was inextricably linked to the propagation of "Asian Values," which appropriated Confucian principles for the legitimization of conservative state authoritarianism administered by the Lee Kuan Yew government within a new-liberal global capitalist economy. This was an altogether new discursive input for me.[15]

Growing up in India, one must acknowledge that "Asia" is not an integral part of our public discourse. Not only do we grow up without any real sense of belonging to Asia, we do not see ourselves as "Asian." We become "Asian" only when we leave India and find ourselves promptly branded as a "South Asian." Working in Singapore on an inter-Asian theatre workshop, I had no other choice but to confront the vast labor force of this prosperous city-state, whose infrastructure has been built by short-term contract workers from poorer countries like India, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines. You can be sure that these laborers will

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Perspective," *Conflicts and Tensions: The Cultures and Globalization Series, Vol. 1*, eds. Helmut Anheier and Yudhisthir Raj Isar. SAGE Publications, 2007.

[14] I am thinking in particular of Brook's production of *The Mahabharata* and Mnouchkine's *L'Indiade*, both of which have been addressed in my essays 'Brook's *Mahabharata*: A View from India," *Theatre and the World*, op. cit., pp. 68-87, and "When 'Eternal India" Meets the YPO," *The Politics of Cultural Practice*, op. cit., pp. 48-50.

[15] My critique of the hegemonic discourse around "Asia" in the Singaporean context can be read in "Consumed in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of 'Lear'," Singapore: Pagesetters, 2000, and "Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization," *Theatre Journal*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Vol. 56, No. 1, March 2004, pp. 1-28.

never be identified as "Asian"; rather, they will be marked by their national identities. In an almost uncanny way, I discovered that the hierarchization and racialization of the labor force were being replicated within the sophisticated, cutting-edge, postmodern confines of the Flying Circus workshop. Once again, I could see how the psychophysical resources and techniques of actors coming from countries like India could be so easily appropriated, re-contextualized, re-invented, packaged, branded, and sold as inter-Asian products in the global art market. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

While pulling out of this inter-Asian experiment, I found myself asking a critical question: How else can one imagine Asia? This question took me back in time as I began to unearth one of the earliest affirmations of the idea of Asia, as enunciated and shared by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore with the Japanese pan-Asian nationalist Okakura Tenshin, who spent eight months in my home-city of Calcutta in 1902, where he wrote *The Ideals of the East*, the first pan-Asian tract in English. The strange friendship between Tagore and Okakura is the subject of my book *Another Asia*, which I will not address here.[16] However, what needs to be pointed out is that in writing the book I finally got some real clues in realizing the importance of positing a new epistemology of the "national" in opposition to "nationalism", which I had mentioned earlier in this lecture.

Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. By 1916, in the midst of the First World War, he had embarked on a global lecture tour which took him to Japan. Here he received a rock-star reception as he was hailed as the "Son of Asia" by tens of thousands of adoring fans, who probably didn't understand a word of his Victorian English in the absence of translation. Far too idealistically, and with no political diplomacy whatsoever, bordering on audacity, the Poet spoke his mind. In rich metaphorical language, he made clear to his Japanese audiences that in surrendering to the "self-idolatory of nation-worship" they were destroying themselves and killing the idea of Asia. Needless to say, his critique did not go down well. From being lionized and deified, he was cut dead and rendered *persona non grata*.

To this day, Tagore's critique of nationalism in his lectures in Japan has not been surpassed for its sheer virulence and absence of compromise. For Tagore, nationalism represented a soul-denying mechanization of everyday life; it served as a camouflage for racism and xenophobia against poorer neighbouring countries like Korea and marginalized indigenous communities like the Ainu; it was the site of surveillance and its "protection of state secrets."[17] Today, as we listen to this critique, bordering on a total rejection of the idea of nationalism, we realize how prescient Tagore was in anticipating what we are living with in the world today. But, inevitably, we are also confounded by the total absence of reconciliation between Tagore's anti-nationalism and the fact that he is our most revered national poet and the composer of our national anthem, in addition to Bangladesh's national anthem, and with some influence on Sri Lanka's national anthem as well. How can we reconcile this incommensurable difference?

This is where the argument of "national anti-nationalism" comes into being, compelling us to articulate a distinct epistemology of the "national" in opposition to state-determined nationalism. With Tagore there was no equivocation in differentiating between a "good nationalism" and a "bad nationalism," or, in today's political jargon, "civic nationalism" and "ethnic nationalism." Nor did he ever come out in favour of "patriotism" as distinct from "nationalism," which would seem to be the current trend today. Not only are we challenged

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[16] Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[17] For a detailed analysis of Tagore's critique of nationalism, read Chapter 2 of *Another Asia*, op. cit.

by the absence of a clearly articulated epistemology of the "national," this very absence almost inevitably determines the subsuming of the "national" in "nationalism."

This arguably theoretical problem is not just ours in the field of theatre and performance studies, it is also a glaring lacuna in political theory and philosophy as well. The closest I have ever come to finding an articulation of the distinction between "the national" and "nationalism" is to be found in the closing lines of Frantz Fanon's "On National Culture," where he says, "National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension… It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture."[18] Arguably, there are some valuable discriminations at work here, which may not be Tagorean in spirit, but which nonetheless deepen the relationships – and differences - between "the national," "nationalism," "internationalism," and the universality of "all culture." There is ground here for some much-needed work in rearticulating interculturalism through a more inflected understanding of the "national."

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Ironically, and significantly, when theorists and ideologues fail to articulate the vital distinctions of concepts in words, it is artists who can embody these distinctions in their actual practice. This is what I discovered while participating as a dramaturge in a multidisciplinary, multicultural art project called Cluster, which was held in Adelaide, Australia. This extraordinary three-year project held between 2003-2005 brought together some of the most talented creative artists in Australia from across the disciplinary spectrum – photography, installation art, theatre design, stand-up comedy, circus arts, video art, sound design, contemporary dance. Each of these artists represented what could be called a hyphenated identity – Chinese-Australian, Japanese-Australian, Iranian-Australian, Polish-Australian, Vietnamese-Australian, and so on.[19] Yet, what struck me very powerfully is that each of these artists was passionate about holding on to the national component of "Australian" in their arguably hybrid, postmodern identities. However, each of them was "Australian" in a highly personalized and creative register. What united them was their unequivocal opposition to the official nationalism of the Australian state as represented by the then Prime Minister, John Howard. By this time he had made himself even more infamous in his uncharitable attitude towards boat people and refugees by declaring, "*We* will decide who comes into the country and the circumstances in which they come."[20] To this imperialist declaration, Howard received one of the sharpest rejoinders not from liberal politicians, but from Wadjularbinna, a Gungalidda elder, who said: "It is not John Howard's country, it has been stolen…taken over by the first fleet of illegal boat people…[W]e were all different, speaking different languages, but we all had the same kinship system for all human beings, in a spiritual way. Our religion and cultural beliefs teach us that everyone is a part of us and we should care about them… it's a duty."[21]

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[18] Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 199.

[19] For more background on Cluster, read my essay "Hauntings of the Intercultural: Enigmas and Lessons on the Borders of Failure," *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte. London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

[20] Quoted in Helen Gilber and Jacqueline Lo, *Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.207.

[21] Ibid., pp. 207-208.

I have to say that every time I read these lines that they resonate for me on at least two levels: one, Wadjularbinna is calling attention to one of the cardinal principles underlying any intercultural exchange – hospitality, an openness to strangers, and, especially, to people in need. Unlike Derrida's somewhat too utopian and abstract rendering of hospitality bordering on impossibility, asserting "*the* law" of an "absolute" and "unconditional" hospitality,[22] Wadjurlabinna's hospitality is more grounded in communitarian law and practice. Second, another source of resonance in Wadjularbinna's statement is her use of the word "duty." For me this translates as *dharma*, a code of conduct which resonates in ancient Indian epics like the *Mahabharata*. In the Aboriginal context, the crucial difference is that "duty" is not determined by any particular caste privilege or social obligation, but linked to "the kinship of human beings," in which there is no possibility of isolating one human from another. If we are searching for an ethics of interculturality, then it is to be found in Wadjularbinna's earthy wisdom.

This brings me to the challenge of opening ourselves to non-liberal constituencies in intercultural practice and philosophy, which I had brought up earlier in the lecture. Let me illustrate this point by providing a somewhat thick description of one particular intervention in Cluster by the only Indigenous participant in the project, the contemporary visual artist rea (who spells here name with a small "r").[23] Responding to the general theme of Cluster focusing on "death," rea chose to focus on the death of language, and, more specifically, the death of Indigenous languages. To structure her intervention, she chose to focus not on a video installation but on a soundscape, where the words were deconstructed, reassembled, and juxtaposed in the form of a collage. The words themselves came from an intensely patriotic poem in English, "My Country," which thousands of Australian schoolchildren have belted out in classrooms across the country for decades. Rea first heard this poem on the radio recited by a famous Australian Indigenous poet. Instinctively, she felt that it was an Indigenous poem, which spoke to her as a young Indigenous woman. Only later did she realize that the poem has been written by Dorothea McKellar, an Anglo-Celtic white poet. This must have come as a jolt to rea, and, in all probability, it must have compelled her to ask: Do I stop loving this poem which means so much to me now that I know that it has been composed by a white woman? Interculturalism is full of such ambiguities and tantalizing questions. To rea's credit, she didn't stop loving the poem, but, inevitably, her relationship to it and the question of authorship had to be problematized.

Perhaps, these were some of the catalytic inputs that went into rea's composition of the three-part soundscape. In the first part, all one hears in a totally blackened space, with not a glimmer of a visual image, is a polyphony of sounds. More specifically, one hears the voices of all the participants in Cluster reading "My Country" in a bewildering range of accents. There is something magical and unprecedented about accents, which enables words to be totally transformed through the border-crossing propensity of migrant voices. If one is allergic to accents, then one should not attempt to do intercultural theatre.

The second part of the soundscape begins with an external voice saying, "I would like to teach you how to recite 'My Country' in an Indigenous language, Warlpiri." What follows could be described as the torturous process that goes into learning any language. Listening to the Cluster participants, all Australian, learning to speak an Indigenous language, my political unconscious was sparked as I found myself recalling one of the most paradigmatic lines linked to the

[22] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

[23] This intervention has been described in detail in the closing section of my essay "Hauntings of the Intercultural," op. cit., pp. 179-200.

postcolonial canon – Caliban's searing lines to Prospero, "You taught me language and all I know is how to curse." What would have happened, I wondered, if Prospero could have learned Caliban's language, assuming that Caliban still spoke his mother tongue? Interculturalism lends itself to questioning such paradoxical possibilities.

Finally, the third part of the soundscape is somewhat ironic, as the participants attempt to recite their own translations of "My Country" in their mother-tongues. Here it becomes obvious that many of these mother-tongues have been lost in the diaspora, and therefore, they sound somewhat stilted and "foreign." But this does not stop the speakers from identifying with – and claiming – their mother-tongues as part of their cultural heritage.

I have to acknowledge that I was thrilled by the overall experience, which I found both moving and enlightening. When the lights came on, I went up to rea and offered her my congratulations: "What are you going to do with the piece? Where is it going?" To which she responded sharply, "It's not going anywhere. This is a one-off, a mere demonstration. I have no intention to show this piece in a public space." "Why not?" I asked, unable to conceal my dismay. "Well," she said, "for a start I haven't got permission from the Dorothea McKellar estate to use the poem for my soundscape. But, more critically, I haven't asked permission from the Warlpiri elders to use their language." "Why didn't you use your own language?" I asked. That's when I felt a tinge of sadness in rea's response, "I don't know my own language, Gamilaraay," but then, with a touch of resolution, she added, "I want to learn it."

So many strands of thought to unravel here. I can't deny that when I first heard rea's response that I felt in my gut that she was resorting to needless self-censorship. It took me some time to realize that my hermeneutic reflex of self-censorship was inextricably linked to an essentially liberal notion of authorship and creativity, where it is taken for granted that almost any use of "foreign" material can be justified on grounds of artistic license and freedom. Later I learned to accept that rea was actually indicating a different set of protocols guiding interaction with Indigenous cultures. It is not as if the Warlpiri people would necessarily reject her experiment with their language, but there are procedures that need to be followed in order to enter into a respectful dialogue with Indigenous culture. These procedures have nothing do with the cavalier assumptions of "anything goes" or "I can do what I want," symptomatic of the drives underlying the fetishization of "culture of choice," which characterized the liberal model of interculturalism in the 1970s.

As I come to the end of this lecture, what are the challenges that remain in making intercultural theatre practice more reflexive and dialogic? How do we radically rethink the intercultural paradigm of the 1970s, with which I began this lecture? Extrapolating from what I have already said, I would say that the first challenge lies in finding new way of strategizing renewed opposition to the onslaught of nationalist and sectarian pressures, without giving up on the creative possibilities of redefining the "national" at personal and creative levels. A new way of articulating "national anti-nationalism" could be a vital force in preventing interculturalism from succumbing to the privilege of global cosmopolitanism. The second challenge lies in being vigilant about the attack on liberal values by the authoritarian Right, while being mindful about the ways in which liberal norms can exclude the universalist and ecological principles of non-liberal constituencies such as Indigenous communities. In other words, a new articulation of interculturalism demands a closer engagement with non-liberal philosophies instead of an uncritical surrender to the dominant norms of liberal individualism. The third challenge concerns the creation of new modalities of translation. It is fatuous to assume that even if we are inspired by Indigenous worldviews that they will be automatically transferred into intercultural practice. In any process of translation moving beyond a strictly linguistic transfer of words, there are mediations and infrastructures of logistics and communication to be

acknowledged. The future of interculturalism is intrinsically related to new ways in which we can embody principles of translation in more equitable forms of sustainable intercultural practice.

In this regard, one of the key challenges of translation concerns the recent attempt by some politicians in the European Council to consider the institutionalization of interculturalism as a new cultural policy in opposition to multiculturalism, which is assumed to be defunct. This has precipitated debates between political philosophers and cultural theorists, some of whom feel that interculturalism offers a new paradigm, while others think that it is merely piggy-backing on what multiculturalism has already articulated and achieved.[24] Suffice it to say that whatever the outcome of this debate, interculturalism as policy will only begin to make sense if policy-makers can humble themselves in learning from the lessons of those practitioners in the theatre and art world who have spent many years working through the nitty-gritty of intercultural practice, both in terms of its creative dynamics and in relation to its exploitative propensities.

Finally, I would say that despite the somewhat wide sweep of references in this lecture, it is worth remembering that, in the final analysis, whether one is doing theatre at intercultural, intracultural, or multicultural levels, that the theatrical encounter almost always takes place in the here and now, for a specific group of people in a particular time and space. I would urge us all to be more alert to those differences in our own communities, which we tend to take for granted. In being open to the other in ourselves and to the most intimate others in our own neighbourhoods, we can more meaningfully recreate the paradigm of interculturalism for our troubled times. We need to begin where we are, in our own troubled locations, at home.

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[24] Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood, "How does Interculturalism Contrast with Multiculturalism?", *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 33, Issue 2, 2011, pp. 175-196.

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